

16TH KÖRBER DIALOGUE MIDDLE EAST

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**OLD CONFLICTS –
NEW ALLIANCES?
CRISIS MANAGE-
MENT IN THE
MIDDLE EAST**

KÖRBER FOUNDATION
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

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Executive Summary

- The political vacuum that arose from the United States' restraint in the Middle East has been exploited by Russia to conduct military intervention in Syria. This has underpinned Russia's claims to greater influence as a global actor. Nevertheless, Russia has yet to demonstrate a clear exit strategy from the Syrian conflict.
- Russia and the West face serious obstacles to cooperation in the fight against jihadist terrorism as some of their interests and goals stand in diametrical opposition. This is particularly the case with regard to the future of Bashar al-Assad.
- Free elections, an inclusive transitional government and the preservation of the largest possible number of state structures are of central importance to a functioning post-war order in Syria. The mistakes made in Iraq after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein must be avoided in Syria.

Russian Military Intervention in Syria

The participants agreed that Russian military intervention in Syria had underpinned the country's claims to greater influence as a global actor. Moscow, the participants argued, had exploited the power vacuum that had developed out of the United States' reluctance to take action in the Middle East. Moreover, Russian intervention in Syria was aimed at demonstrating the country's strength domestically and internationally level. Accordingly, Russia's military operations in Syria were a sign of the country's determination to counter Jihadist groups at home and abroad. Nevertheless, there was unease in Russia that its involvement in Syria could produce long-term consequences similar to those that developed out of the lengthy Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. In addition, Russia was concerned about the announcement by armed Syrian rebels that they intended "to

give Russia a bloody nose" and force the country to withdraw from Syria. Nonetheless, a long-term commitment by Moscow in the Levant was neither viewed as desirable from a Russian standpoint nor from the perspective of the Syrian population. This was particularly the case, the participants argued, because the Russian leadership currently lacked a clear exit strategy.

Some discussants highlighted the timing of Russia's intervention, which had been based on intelligence cautioning against the impending fall of Damascus to rebel groups. As such, Moscow's strategy was said to entail a clear geostrategic calculus. Finally, in supporting Assad, the Kremlin was expressing rejection of what it perceived as Western endorsement of forced regime change.

RUSSIA LACKS A CLEAR EXIT STRATEGY IN SYRIA.

The participants acknowledged that the Russian leadership was striving to demonstrate its preparedness to work with the West in the fight against jihadist terrorism. Russia's aim with this approach was to break out of its isolation. There was no consensus, however, on the questions of the likelihood and extent of possible cooperation between Russia and the Western states involved in Syria. Participants who were skeptical about the chances of such collaboration argued that Russia's aims – at least in part – stood in diametrical opposition to those of the US-led, anti-IS coalition. In particular, Russian support for Assad constituted a critical obstacle to working together as in the Russian reading of the situation Assad was the only actor who could hold Syria together in the long-term. Importantly, some participants suggested that Moscow's support for the ruler in Damascus was neither limitless nor unconditional and that Russia might actually be willing to diminish its support for Assad in the medium to long term.

Alongside Moscow, Tehran constitutes one of the Assad regime's protecting powers. One discussant noted that the Russian presence in Syria thwarted Iranian interests in Syria. In the long term, most participants considered the Russian intervention in Syria to be a destabilizing factor. Nevertheless, a small number of participants argued that Russian intervention in Syria provided a chance to move forward in the search for a political solution to the conflict.

How to move forward in Syria

According to one participant, the primary objective of the Syrian opposition was securing the withdrawal of external actors from the country; the opposition was even said to prioritize this issue over removing Assad from power. In addition, the participant pointed out that as long as Syria was being abused for regional and international proxy wars, there would be no hope of ending the conflict. Moreover, Syria had turned into a “black hole” that was not only drawing in non-state actors, but also states, which could also be “swallowed up” by the conflict. In order to prevent this from happening, de-escalation was vital in Syria, and this implied the need for a far-reaching and lasting ceasefire. In this context, another participant maintained that the struggle against IS would only have a chance of success once the fighting had ended in most of Syria.

None of the parties were in a strong enough position to implement a military solution. This conclusion led the participants to argue for talks within the framework of the International Syria Support Group that were to run in parallel to an intra-Syrian dialogue. This approach, the participants maintained, could pave the way towards a political process. Some participants stressed the need to bring Islamist militias such as Ahrar al-Sham to the negotiating table because agreement by the opposition would be meaningless without the participation of “moderate jihadist” groups on the ground.

Different courses of action were discussed regarding long-term goals in Syria. One participant suggested a regional peace confer-

**DE-ESCALATION IN SYRIA
REQUIRES A FAR-REACHING
AND LASTING CEASEFIRE.**

ence along the lines of the Congress of Vienna, which, it was argued, could serve as the starting point for a new order in Syria and the Levant. Other proposals included a process of federalization in Syria that saw the country divided into cantons under the supervision of the international community; a “Marshall Plan for Syria” and a “Syrian Taif.” The latter involved a system of power sharing that included proportional representation for all religious denominations and which was based on the Taif Agreement, the treaty that ended the Lebanese civil war.

The participants agreed that free elections, an inclusive transitional government and the preservation of the largest possible number of existing state structures constituted the

THE MISTAKES MADE IN IRAQ AFTER THE OVERTHROW OF SADDAM HUSSEIN MUST BE AVOIDED IN SYRIA.

to be avoided, as wherever state structures had been dismantled or had collapsed a danger existed that that non-governmental – and even terrorist – groups could rapidly fill the resulting vacuum.

The GCC-States: Opportunities and Challenges

Given the volatility of the region, one participant pointed out that at first glance the countries belonging to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) seemed like a “villa in the middle of a jungle”. However, a more detailed analysis not only demonstrated the political,

core elements of any political transition in Syria. Moreover, the mistakes that had been made in Iraq after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein would have

economic and social challenges that these countries faced, but also the differences between the Gulf monarchies themselves. This was also reflected in the fact that the broad support that had existed among the GCC states for Saudi-led intervention in Yemen seemed to be disintegrating. Most Gulf states had welcomed Riyadh’s military intervention in Yemen, as they believed it sent a powerful signal to Tehran. However, the prolonged duration of the conflict and persistent uncertainties about Riyadh’s strategic objectives in Yemen have made the differences between Saudi Arabia and its allies, especially the United Arab Emirates, even more palpable. In particular, disagreement was said to reign over the “end game” in Yemen and the cornerstones of a post-war order.

Despite high domestic approval ratings in Saudi Arabia for the intervention, voices were growing louder in the country for a withdrawal from Yemen, the development of a more cautious regional stance, and a focus on domestic challenges. However, even though Riyadh was said to be confronted with a number of structural problems, none of the participants viewed the stability of the kingdom as in danger in the short to medium term. Nevertheless, falling oil prices and the country’s economic dependence on oil exports, but also overdue political and social reforms in the face of a young population, were said to pose long-term central challenges to Saudi Arabia. In addition, competition between various influential members of the Saudi leadership, especially the rivalry between Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef and Mohammed bin Salman – the Deputy Crown Prince, Minister of Defense and son of Saudi King Salman – could constitute a further potentially destabilizing current.

About the Körber Dialogue Middle East

The KÖRBER DIALOGUE MIDDLE EAST provides a platform for multilateral discussions about current foreign and security policy issues relating to the Middle East. The dialogue involves foreign policy experts from the EU, the US, and the Middle East who meet regularly in a confidential environment to develop policy-oriented ideas and recommendations. Senior foreign policy professionals and representatives of leading think tanks gathered at the workshop in Berlin to discuss the latest developments in the Middle East.

This executive summary contains a selection of the arguments that we believe are relevant to the current political debate. The summary is distributed to the participants of the KÖRBER DIALOGUE MIDDLE EAST and selected policymakers.

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